

The Impact of Social Media on the Practice of SEO

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Abstract

After [Google & Bing's Announcements](#) of partnerships with Twitter in November 2009, SEO pundits began to suspect that social signals had begun to directly impact search engine rankings. According to Falls and Deckers their book No Bullshit Social Media (2011) “Social search is another layer of information that search engines take into account when producing result. These connections – your social graph – produce what Google considers highly relevant results for your search query.” In 2011, just two years after the Google and Bing announcement, social signals are arguably some of most important search engine ranking signals. The use of social signals by the search engines has suddenly and radically redefined the roles and responsibilities of SEO practitioners. This paper investigates the impact of social media on the practice of SEO.

The Impact of Social Media on the Practice of SEO

In a December 1st 2010 interview conducted by Danny Sullivan, Google and Bing confirmed that Twitter and Facebook “shared links” and “social sharing” had a direct impact on search engine rankings. It was also revealed that additional Twitter and Facebook signals were being used as input signals into search engine ranking algorithms. Bings called this ranking signal “Social Authority” while Google called it “Author Authority”. For more information reference [What Social Signals Do Google & Bing Really Count?](#)

The following day on December 2nd 2010 Rand Fishkin posted [Google + Bing Confirm that Twitter/Facebook Influence SEO](#) which provided additional insights into the impact of shared links, social sharing, Social Authority and Author Authority (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1

Sharing and Social/Author Authority Signals

<i>Social Sharing or Shared Links</i>	<i>Author Authority and Social Authority</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Diversity of Sources• Surrounding Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Quantity of Friends/Followers• Importance of Friends/Followers

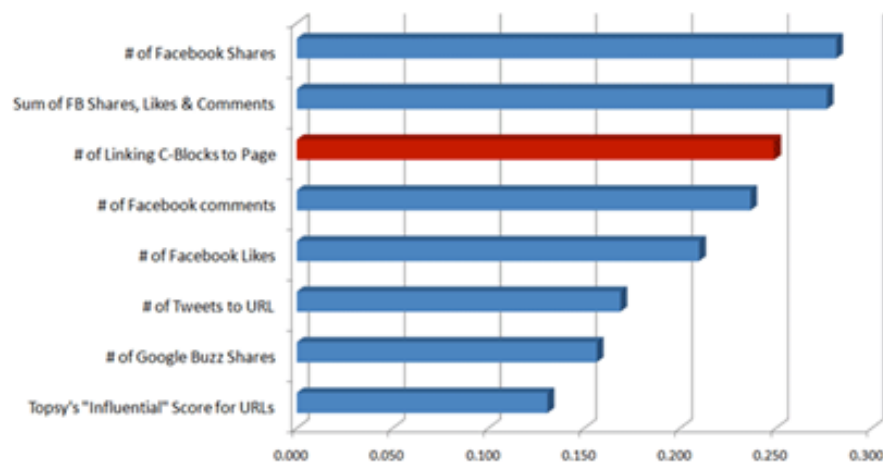
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement Level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of Friends/Followers Ratios Topic Focus / Relevance Association Bias
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Fishkin goes on to say “These signals represent my opinions only, and while it's very likely that at least some are being used, it's even more likely there are many more that aren't listed above. Over time, hopefully we'll discover more about the impact of social sharing on web rankings and how we can best combine SEO + social media marketing”.

Link Metrics Verses Social Signals

In March 2011, SEOmoz released a study that compared Google results for search queries with high rankings to those with low rankings. The purpose was to determine if higher ranking results had certain features that lower ranking results did not. It is important to note that this comparison was an attempt to determine if correlations existed between high rankings and specific features. Per Fishkin (2011) “Thus, our first caveat is - correlation is NOT causation - the features we show may indeed be directly influencing Google's ranking algorithm, but they also may just be artifacts or features that high ranking pages tend to have (though, we do know from their [public statements](#) that at least some data from these sources is influencing the results).”.

Figure 1 Correlation of Social Media Based Factors



Given that Google’s ranking algorithm has for years been based primarily on the quantity and quality of

inbound links, it's quite surprising that C-blocks showed less correlation to high rankings than the number of Facebook Shares and of the Sum of Facebook Shares, Likes and Comments. The results of the SEOMoz study are nothing short of astonishing when you consider that Google and Bing first announced that social media signals directly impacted rankings in December 2010 and the SEOMoz data was published just four months later in March 2011.

The Growing Importance of the Social Graph

Essentially the link graph is a representation of interlinking between web sites while the social graph is a representation of interrelationships between people. Google uses the link graph to derive quality metrics link PageRank, TrustRank and Domain Authority and to assign relative value to web pages and domains for ranking purposes. Google and Bing also use the social graph to derive social metrics like Author Authority and Social Authority which are used to assess the quantity and quality of link sharing on Twitter and Facebook.

While the link graph continues to be the foundation of search engine ranking algorithms, what has become increasingly clear over the last 6 months, is that the social graph is growing in importance at the expense of the link graph. Exactly what social signals do the search engines value and what are the impacts of these signals? The topic is hotly debated and opinions of the SEO pundits seem to fluctuate almost daily. A compilation of the most likely social ranking signals for Facebook, Twitter & YouTube and detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Social Ranking Signals

Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Facebook Shares • The Social authority of Shares • Relevance of Shares • Number of Facebook Likes • Number of Facebook Comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Followers • The social authority of Followers • Relevance of Followers • The number of tweets • Social authority of tweets • The number of Retweets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of Views • User Comments • References From Independent Profiles • Title of Video • Percent of Likes vs. Dislikes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ratio of tweets to Retweets 	
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The Interdependency between Social Media and SEO

Since Google's introduction of Social Search in 2009, SEO practitioners have debated the potential impact of social signals on SERP rankings. In December 2010, when Google and Bing finally confirmed the direct impact of social signals on search results, the conversation turned to the growing interdependence between the two disciplines. Lee Odden, (Odden, 2011) provides an overview of how to implement a social SEO strategy by creating and promoting engaging content, see "Cycle of Social and SEO" below.

Figure 2 Cycle of Social & SEO



- The cycle starts with optimized content creation and promotion.
- The content is noticed, shared & voted on which creates additional awareness.
- Increased exposure attracts more subscribers, fans, friends, followers & links.
- Increased links & social exposure grow search & referral traffic.

- Traffic & community help research, develop & further grow social networks for content & SEO.
- Learn, modify and repeat.

The cycle begins with the creation and promotion of content that is relevant to the target audience. Assuming you have made this wondrous prose easy to share, the content will garner increasing number of fans, friends, follows and links. This increasing social exposure in turn improves search engine rankings, drives additional traffic and improves conversion rates. The next step as Odden mentions above is “Learn, modify and repeat.”

SEO Responsibilities in 2011

I became involved in SEO in 2001 while employed as a Webmaster for a small company and the CEO mentioned that he would like to rank for a particular keyword. Nobody in the company knew anything about SEO -- and so it began. At the time, SEO really wasn't particularly complex and a little bit of knowledge about keyword research, metadata, on-page content and link building was all that was required. Over time, SEO became increasingly more complex. Rand Fishkin (Fishkin, 2011) has summarized the evolution of SEO roles and responsibilities between 1999 and 2008 (Figure 3.).

Figure 3 SEO Responsibilities 1999 to 2008

SEO Responsibilities		
	Emerging 1999-2003	Added in 2004-2008
Accessibility	Crawlability of Site	XML Sitemaps
	Spider-Readable Content	Controlling for "Thin Content"
	Search-Friendly Architecture	Rel=Canonical
	Limiting Duplicate Content	Nofollow "Evaporation" Issues
	HTML Sitemaps	
Keywords	Basic Keyword Research	Keyword Difficulty Analysis
	On-Page Keyword Targeting	Keyword Usage in Images
	On-Site Anchor Text	Controlling for Keyword Manipulation (footers in particular)
Link Building	Site Owner Outreach	Social Media Outreaches
	Directories	Press/PR Tactics
	Blogs & Personal Sites	Content Syndication
	Guestbook/Signature Links	Badges + Widgets
		Embeddable Content
		Guest Blogging
		Article Marketing
		Many, Many More...
Search Verticals	Images	Maps/Local
		Video
		Shopping

In 2009, things began to change dramatically primarily due to the impact of social media on SEO. “The last 2.5 years, however, have made for some fairly substantive changes. We're facing large-scale, industry-shifting trends that have upset the classic model for search engine optimization...” (Fishkin, 2011). SEO roles and responsibilities in 2011 look more like what Fishkin has outlined below in Figure 4.

Figure 4 SEO Responsibilities in 2011



Conclusion

With the increasing impact of social media on search engine ranking, social media has suddenly become a significant part of the SEO practitioner's efforts to drive organic traffic. Following is a summary of social media practices that practitioners of SEO should master or at a minimum have an in-depth understand of.

1. Implementing various social media platforms (Google+, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc.)
2. Optimize social media content for SEO.
3. Optimize social media for sharing.
4. Developing engaging content that is relevant to the target community.
5. Community Management.
6. Reputation Management.

Moving forward social media competence will be required to satisfy client demands and to effectively engage cross-functionally with those who traditionally manage social media efforts. And so once again it begins!

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